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ABSTRACT

High school honors programs can help meet the needs of students who have an extra measure of intellectual ability and the desire to learn in depth, become independent, and pursue special interests. This paper points out how little is done nationwide to help gifted students and urges schools to institute honors programs. It then describes an English honors program at a Missouri high school, explains the philosophy on which the program is based, and discusses the identification of potential students for honors programs, the scheduling of students into honors classes, a recommended philosophy for teachers of English honors classes, and qualities of the superior student. (GW)

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THE HONORS PROGRAM IN ENGLISH
AT Central High School
St. Joseph, Missouri

by Virginia F. Frazier

Let me state categorically that I am deeply committed to the concept of an Honors Program in high school. Not all teachers, parents, administrators or even all students believe that the talented and gifted need special programs. No one would deny the right of the physically or mentally handicapped child to an education that will help him/her to reach the full potential. Why do we deny or ignore the rights of the students with special talents and gifts?

Let me share twenty years of experience in an Honors Program with you. The term "Honors" sometimes conjures visions of Ichabod Cranish kids with Eisntein intellects. Not so. In secondary schools, students involved in Honors Programs are delightful (usually), dedicated (frequently), and devilish (sometimes). But so are all kids. What distinguishes the student in an Honors Program is that he/she has an extra measure of intellectual ability, a desire to learn in depth, to become independent, and to pursue special interests. More often than not, the student is college bound, is highly self-motivated, and wishes to excel. Physically, such students are often outstanding. Indeed, students in Honors are frequently involved in such school activities as sports, music, dramatics, journalism, student government. The best essayist or poet may also be a top-notch science student, a member of the Math team, a swimming or tennis star.

That some students (approximately 2-5%) have considerable

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potential is nothing startlingly new. But what is startling is how little is really done nationwide to help the gifted. Not until the passage of House Bill 474 did Missouri make mandatory at least some aid to gifted and talented children. (I often use the terms interchangeably, although the Bill uses the terms "Gifted and Talented."). Nationwide, our efforts to provide for the gifted are comparable to offering a piglet to a starving python!

In some school systems, the Honors classes are labeled A. P. (Advanced Placement), provided the students will all take the A. P. test of the College Entrance Examination Board. One excellent Illinois school uses numbers to designate the level of difficulty, with Level 5 as the most difficult. A California district designates the program "The Able Learners Program" (A. L. P.).

Perhaps what follows on the background, philosophy, identification and scheduling of students, and qualities of both teachers and students in Honors will help, if you wish to start or revive such a program.

OVERVIEW

In an attempt to provide for individual differences in students, Central High School has long had a program for really able students in English and other academic subjects. The program has been designated by different names through the years. At one time, all students were sectioned into X, Y, Z courses (ability grouped tracking). In the early 1960's, the district's Assistant Superintendent in charge of Instruction implemented a program called the Academically Talented

Program (A. T.). Through the years, the A. T. label has been lost and the classes are popularly known as the "Honors." A more accurate title would be the Program of Weighted Courses, as the classes in English carry extra grade points for A, B, C, D grades. (Not all teachers agree with the weighted grades, nor do all students.) On official transcripts, Honors courses are marked with an asterisk to correspond with an explanatory legend. The English classes include Honors English I, English II, English III, and English Literature, the first three of which fulfill the requirement for three years in English. The fourth (English Literature) is an elective class for college preparatory students. At the present time, we average four or five sections at each level. The number varies from year to year. All are year courses. This year, we are adding a weighted course in Composition for seniors. Our new schedule will designate the Honors classes as "A W." Five teachers are scheduled for Honors English.

Once on the program, a student with teacher recommendation and/or parental consent may leave the program, preferably at the end of a semester and not before the end of a quarter. Changing from the Honors to the Elective English Program without valid reason is discouraged. Teachers in the Elective Program frequently recommend good students for the Honors Program.

PHILOSOPHY

The administration and the teachers at Central High School believe that each student should be taught according to his needs, insofar as those needs can be determined and insofar as our present

resources permit. We believe we have an obligation to all students, and that we must not neglect the students with intellectual gifts and special talents. We do not believe in a "program" which sets these students "above" others. Rather, we believe in a challenging program open to all students who wish to try the classes. We believe students with special talents and gifts should be encouraged but not forced to take classes that will challenge them and help to develop their talents. We are fully aware that the whole responsibility for these students does not belong to the school alone, but we believe that the school has a basic obligation to such students.

Further, we believe that students taking classes in Honors English should be well counseled by the Counseling staff, with the cooperation of parents and teachers.

IDENTIFYING THE STUDENTS

It is suggested that a variety of methods--not simply I. Q.--be used in identifying these students:

1. Test scores as only one means of identification
2. Observations and referrals of teachers
3. Grade records and past performance
4. Observations which the student himself makes about needs, goals, abilities
5. Comments from the student and his peers
6. Discussion with parents
7. Consistently high level of performance and production.

SCHEDULING THE STUDENTS

The responsibility for scheduling the students into classes in Honors English rests chiefly with the previous teacher and the Counselors, who:

1. Avail themselves of all possible means of identification, encouraging the students to select courses from a broad

range of course offerings, one of which should be English each year.
2. Make the students fully aware of the courses available and the particular nature of these courses, encouraging able students to "try" the program.
3. De-emphasize the weighted grades and emphasize the challenge and nature of the course.

PHILOSOPHY FOR TEACHERS OF HONORS ENGLISH CLASSES

The teachers of Honors English classes must not see themselves as "special," nor see these students as "better" than others. In a democratic society, such a schism is impossible. The teacher must respect the student's mind and special abilities. He must feel no rivalry between himself and the student. He must encourage mutual respect among students and not be guilty of fostering rivalries. He needs to provide an atmosphere of freedom with discipline. The teacher must like this particular kind of student and be prepared to cope with a wide range of differences and behavorial patterns. He should be especially trained for this work through his own interests in things intellectual and cultural and the richness and variety of his own experience. He must be innovative, creative, flexible, open-minded, willinging to probe and to foster a spirit of inquiry. He must de-emphasize grades but grade fairly on achievement, production, and progress, using no curves and maintaining realistic standards.

THE SUPERIOR STUDENT

1. Possesses a long attention span
2. Enjoys being creative and independent, with special interest in analogies and figures of speech
3. Understands complex directions and can supply his own
4. Is curious about many subjects, develops his own motivation, enjoys words
5. Analyzes and discriminates, organizes and develops
6. Learns through his own mistakes--may be sensitive and self-critical

7. Relates thoughts, illustrations and problems to real life situations; is interested in philosophy and benefits from mature reading
8. Is energetic, self-directive, resourceful, capable of pursuing and profiting from a lengthy or long-term assignment
9. Is capable of abstract thinking--employs symbols and metaphors and understands the significance.

Central High School has a complete course book entitled The English Program at Central High School. We can lend course books to anyone interested in seeing exactly what the content and method of our courses include. But any school must tailor a program to fit the needs of its own school and community.

The national out-cry for "Basics" would seem to me to include Honors Programs. They are basic to the education of our brightest and best. We fail the nation if we fail to provide for these children. Each year when school starts, I re-read these words by Daniel Webster, for I need to be reminded that I am working with "men's immortal minds."

> "If we work upon marble, it will perish.
> If we work upon brass, time will efface it.
> If we rear temples, they will crumble to dust.
> But if we work upon men's immortal minds,
> If we imbue them with high principles,
> With just fear of God and love of their fellow man,
> We engrave on those tablets something which no
> time can efface,
> And which will brighten and brighten to all eternity."

As I wrote that, I remembered over two thousand "immortal minds" I have touched in my twenty years at Central; and that is humbling indeed!